

# The Revolutionary Guards and the International Drug Trade

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The Revolutionary Guards are significantly involved in the international drug trade, both directly and through proxies. This involvement provides the organization with access to sources of financing that bypass international sanctions, as well as to sophisticated operational platforms that support its subversive efforts aimed at the West. For Iran's enemies, and especially to Israel, the link between a global, sophisticated, and determined organization as the Revolutionary Guards and the world of organized crime is a phenomenon that is, in the absence of appropriate attention and response, liable to have significant strategic ramifications. This essay seeks to demonstrate the link between the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and the international drug trade as one development within the growing terrorism-crime spectrum. The Western discussion on security has not given a great deal of attention to this connection as it relates to the Iranian threat, but evidence and developments of recent years invite an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon and its ramifications. This essay suggests that the link between the Revolutionary Guards and the international drug trade contains not only challenges but also opportunities for Western countries and their allies.

**Keywords:** Revolutionary Guards; Iran; drug trade; terrorism; Hizbollah

The 2013 annual Worldwide Threat Assessment Report produced by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) rated terrorism and transnational organized crime as the second most severe threat to the United States security. Second to cyber threats, terrorism and transnational

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organized crime bypassed the unconventional weapons proliferation threat.<sup>1</sup>

ODNI's decision to link terrorism and organized crime together indicates that Western decision makers realize these two worlds are colliding, and present Western interests with a profoundly dangerous challenge.<sup>2</sup> This essay seeks to demonstrate the link between the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and the international drug trade as one development within the growing terrorism-crime spectrum. The Western discussion on security has not given a great deal of attention to this connection as it relates to the Iranian threat, but evidence and developments of recent years invite an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon and its ramifications. This essay suggests that the link between the Revolutionary Guards and the international drug trade contains not only challenges but also opportunities for Western countries and their allies.

### **Terrorism and Organized Crime**

Extensive, systematic interactions between terrorist organizations and organized crime began in the 1980s, when organizations with political agendas forced their patronage on the drug industry and imposed "taxes" on producers and smugglers of the growing Afghani drug industry. In other locations, such as Latin America, terrorist and criminal organizations joined forces to achieve common goals. Still, despite the friction between political terrorist organizations and criminal organizations, a clear separation between the two was maintained until the early 1990s. While terrorist organizations participated in organized crime solely to finance their political and ideological activities, crime organizations were motivated by the possibility of economic gain, using violence and terrorism as a tactic to ensure the flow of income and the neutralization of both competition and law enforcement.<sup>3</sup>

This dichotomy grew less distinct after the dissolution of the Soviet bloc, which fundamentally changed the international system. New pressures and opportunities for the different players were created through the formation of an open, global economic system, the increase of freedom of travel and trade, the great access to advanced technologies, the expansion of immigrant communities, the weakening of many states, and the many civil wars that broke. Within this new environment, international crime syndicates flourished and built cross-border networks that produced

vast amounts of money and created an extensive global black market, which replaced the funding many terrorist organizations received from sponsoring states during the Cold War. In the 1990s, some of these terrorist organizations started assimilating into the thriving international criminal system by participating in criminal activities, such as the drug trade, smuggling, and credit fraud. This trend led the worlds of terrorism and crime to adopt one another's behavioral patterns and organizational characteristics, blurring the lines between the players.<sup>4</sup>

The events of 9/11 and the war on terrorism gave significant impetus to the involvement of terrorist organizations in organized crime. As sources of funding that were previously available (like supporting nations, "charity" funds, and private donations) were now the main target for international intelligence and law enforcement agencies, terrorist organizations were forced to increase their reliance on the black capital generated by international crime, which escalated the global battle on terrorism. Similarly, the growing international pressure on the operational and logistical infrastructures of terrorist organizations made many of them resort to tactics that were traditionally associated with organized crime<sup>5</sup> and allowed for covert cross-border activity.<sup>6</sup>

These developments have made many researchers in recent years reject the dichotomous view of terrorism and organized crime as separate spheres, and instead opt to view the two as part of a large spectrum of interactions, organizational structures, and methods. Makarenko describes the link between political terrorism and organized crime as a single axis comprises the various players that progress according to developments in their goals and operational tactics. This axis includes phenomena such as alliances between terrorist and criminal organizations that further specific interests, the appropriation of criminal tactics by terrorist organizations and the creation of organic criminal mechanisms within them, the founding of hybrid entities that unify terrorism and organized crime tactics to advance political goals and to maximize profits (coalescence), and the transition of some organizations from one type of activity to another (transformation).<sup>7</sup>

Terrorist organizations are deeply involved in a wide gamut of criminal activities, such as blood diamonds and vehicle theft. Still, the international drug industry, the initial locus of the terrorism-crime connection, remains the most common crime of terrorist organizations.<sup>8</sup> The term "narco-terrorism" was coined by Peruvian president Fernando Belaúnde Terry

in 1993 to describe the drug cartels' usage of terrorist tactics, and has since served as a code name for the tight relationships between terrorist organizations and the global drug industry. According to the American Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), 19 of the 49 organizations on the State Department's list of terrorist organizations and some 60 percent of terrorist organizations around the world are linked to the international drug market. Among the prominent organizations on this list are the Afghani Taliban, al Qaeda, the Colombian FARC,<sup>9</sup> and Hizbollah.<sup>10</sup>

A major motivating factor for terrorist organizations to take part in the drug industry is its tremendous potential for profit, which stems from the industry's enormous consumer base worldwide.<sup>11</sup> According to assessments made by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the international drug market is worth some \$320 billion annually.<sup>12</sup> The potential for such high profits, along with the relatively simple processes of drug production, commerce, and sales makes this industry an effective and accessible source of income for terrorist organizations.<sup>13</sup> In addition, working with organizations that control international smuggling allows for terrorist organizations to have easy access to operations that enhance their capacity to carry out complex, cross-border acts, such as document forgery, human trafficking, customs schemes, and money laundering.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Revolutionary Guards and International Drug Trade Connection**

Established in 1979 by Ayatollah Khomeini, the Revolutionary Guards have grown beyond their basic security function to become a political, social, and economic corporation with a foothold in every aspect of Iranian political and social life.<sup>15</sup> The organization is the most robust economic body in the country, possessing holdings in a wide range of industries, such as security, energy, construction, and communications,<sup>16</sup> and many of its former members currently hold senior political and bureaucratic positions. At the state security level, the institution is a major advocate of Iranian interests in the Middle East and around the world, focusing particularly on Iran's desire for regional hegemony and the ouster of Western influence from the Middle East. In this context, the Revolutionary Guards are active on two major complementary levels. First, the organization leads the efforts to export the Iranian Islamic Revolution, seeking to expand the republic's political, ideological, and religious influences in the Middle

East, Central Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Secondly, the Revolutionary Guards continuously exert efforts to undermine the influence of the United States in the Middle East by harming the superpower's regional interests and its allies. Given that Iran is militarily inferior to the United States, the Revolutionary Guards make extensive global use of asymmetrical strategies in their struggle against the West and its allies, preferring tactics of subversion and terrorism.<sup>17</sup>

Within the ranks of the Revolutionary Guards, the al-Quds Force is in charge of exporting the Islamic Revolution and organizing terrorist and subversive activity against Iran's enemies. Established in 1990, this elite unit uses terrorist methods, provides operational, logistical, and training support to revolutionary and anti-American groups, and penetrates Shiite and various other Muslim populations to create civilian and political infrastructures that support Iran's agenda. The Al-Quds Force utilizes proxies as a way to disguise Iran's involvement in acts of cross-border terrorism. The force's most prominent ally is the Lebanese Hizbollah, which was established with the assistance of the Revolutionary Guards.<sup>18</sup>

The Revolutionary Guards are a part of the Iranian establishment, as opposed to other players along the terrorism-crime axis that are considered non-state actors. Nevertheless, the organization's extensive direct and indirect involvement in international terrorism creates extensive similarity between its needs and methods and those of non-state terrorist organizations.<sup>19</sup> Similar to these non-state actors, the Revolutionary Guards, using the great wealth afforded by the international drug trade, try to gain operational and logistical capabilities that will enhance their ability for terror and subversion in enemy territory.<sup>20</sup> These factors have led the Revolutionary Guards to join the trend of the merging of terrorism and crime and take part in a variety of criminal acts around the world, including the international drug trade.

The Revolutionary Guards' involvement in the international drug trade is neither trivial nor natural. Drug addiction, and especially addictions to products of poppy, is responsible for tens of thousands of Iranian deaths per year<sup>21</sup> and has inflicted much damage on Iranian society, which has one of the world's highest rates of opium and heroin usage (2.26 percent of the population aged 15-64, the third highest rate after the United States and Afghanistan).<sup>22</sup> The vast scope of the Iranian drug problem has driven the government to heavily invest in the prevention of smuggling across

the eastern border of the country. Iran is traditionally considered one of the leading countries in the confiscation of heroin.<sup>23</sup> The Revolutionary Guards play a significant role in Iran's war on drug smugglers, and many members of the organization have been killed in battles with drug traders in the southeastern province of Sistan va Baluchistan and in other eastern provinces.<sup>24</sup> The Revolutionary Guards' participation in the war on drugs is prominently and proudly highlighted by the organization as a means of strengthening its domestic and international legitimacy.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, alongside their efforts to battle drugs, the Revolutionary Guards also wish to harness the strategic and tactical potential of the international drug trade in order to advance their goals.

The involvement of the Revolutionary Guards and the al-Quds Force in the international drug trade provides them with strong ties to global crime organizations. These ties create operational and logistical platforms that support and enhance the ability of the Revolutionary Guards and specifically the al-Quds Force to pose a threat to their enemies' territories and populations by forging documents, smuggling goods across borders, laundering money, supporting black banking, and so on.<sup>26</sup> Drugs are also used by the Revolutionary Guards as weapons against Western nations and their allies, as they are destructive to society, break the nuclear family, damage youth, strengthen organized crime, cause increased violence, decrease the sense of personal safety, and exert pressure on welfare and law enforcement agencies. The state is then forced to allocate a great deal of money and manpower to combat these phenomena. According to the testimony of an Iranian defector and a former member of the Revolutionary Guards, "We were told that the drugs will destroy the sons and daughters of the West, and that we must kill them. Their lives are worth less because they are not Muslims."<sup>27</sup>

Finally, the Revolutionary Guards' involvement in the drug market also provides the organization with cash. Due to the severe international sanctions imposed on Iran, the Revolutionary Guards' involvement in the country's smuggling industry has become a major factor in the country's economy and trade, as it allows the organization to make tremendous profits by controlling border crossings and "taxing" illegal smuggling activity.<sup>28</sup> In this context, the Revolutionary Guards' involvement in the international drug trade and the sponsorship of criminal organizations that are involved in it are a source of income of almost unlimited potential.

The Revolutionary Guards are involved in the international drug trade directly and through proxies. The direct involvement of the Revolutionary Guards is first and foremost exemplified by the Afghani heroin industry. Geographically, Iran is located between the poppy fields of Afghanistan and the West, which makes it the starting point of the world's major heroin trade routes, supplying the drug to Russia, Western Europe, and the United States. The UNODC estimates that some 140 tons of heroin—87 percent of the Afghani heroin trade—are transported through Iran annually.<sup>29</sup> These geostrategic conditions make the Revolutionary Guards a major player in the Afghani heroin industry and, according to American classified intelligence assessments, indicate the involvement of the al-Quds Force in several of the drug smuggling routes going to Western markets from Iran.<sup>30</sup> The Revolutionary Guards maintain close contact with leading figures from the Afghani drug trade and international crime organizations in order to facilitate drug deliveries to the West. The transport of drugs is then exchanged for monetary payment or operational assistance, such as the distribution of Iranian weapons to the Taliban or other terrorist organizations that fight against the Afghani government and the NATO forces that are stationed in Afghanistan.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to cooperation with crime organizations, the Revolutionary Guards also seem to run their own autonomous apparatus for the production and distribution of heroin. Members of the organization bring tremendous quantities of raw opium from Afghanistan to Iran, which are processed into heroin and other opiates in local labs. These drugs are then transported westwards through the extensive smuggling network established by the Revolutionary Guards, which consists of large fleets of ships and planes, straw companies, and secret bank accounts.<sup>32</sup> A report produced by the US Embassy in Azerbaijan cites senior Azeri government personnel as saying that the Revolutionary Guards are a major player in the country's heroin market. According to the report, investigations by the Azeri government discovered that members of the Revolutionary Guards are directly involved in the transportation of heroin from Afghanistan to Azerbaijan and that the production of these drugs take place in labs in Tabriz and in other Iranian cities. In Azerbaijan, this activity is seen as part of the Iranian attempt to destabilize the pro-Western Azeri government.<sup>33</sup> Evidence submitted by Revolutionary Guards deserters reveals that



involvement in the heroin trade is a widespread phenomenon among various units of the organization.<sup>34</sup>

The Revolutionary Guards also seek to advance their goals by teaming up with international drug traders from Latin America, which is an important strategic arena for Iran. A major player in this Iranian effort is the al-Quds Force. With great determination and the investment of large resources, Iran is trying to expand its web of relations with dominant regional players like Venezuela, Bolivia, and Cuba in order to create operational platforms that could cause harm to US targets and hurt US interests in case the conflict over Iran's nuclear arms program escalates.<sup>35</sup>

In accordance with its traditional operational methods, much of the al-Quds Force activity in Latin America is carried out by proxies that provide it with high levels of operational capabilities while maintaining distance and the ability to deny their involvement. The main Iranian proxy has been identified by American intelligence and administration sources as Hizbollah, which maintains close links with the al-Quds Force and is the executioner of various terrorist and organized criminal activities in Latin America, such as money laundering, member recruitment and training, weapons and drug trade, document forgery, and even the acquisition of minerals and other raw materials likely to serve the Iranian nuclear arms program. It is natural that al-Quds Force relies on Hizbollah for its activities, largely due to the organizations' close relationship and shared interests, and also due to Hizbollah's operational capabilities and power in that part of the world.<sup>36</sup> American authorities point to Hizbollah as a major element in the Iranian threat to American national security and interests in Latin America. A central component of this assessment is Hizbollah's connection to the South American drug cartels.<sup>37</sup>

Hizbollah is a richly experienced player in every aspect of the international drug trade. Since its founding, the organization has been a key player in the Lebanese drug industry, its involvement spanning to everything from growing the raw materials, through producing the drugs, to smuggling and distributing them.<sup>38</sup> Over the years, Hizbollah has expanded its involvement in the international drug trade and became active throughout the Middle East, Europe, Africa, and South America.<sup>39</sup> The organization's extensive involvement with the South American cocaine market has been exposed in recent years.<sup>40</sup> Hizbollah is active in operations such as the initiation and development of contacts and joint ventures with



large drug cartels in countries like Mexico and Colombia, the transporting of drugs to the United States and to other global destinations, laundering of vast amounts of money, and participation in smuggling and organized crime.

The connection between Hizbollah and the Mexican drug cartels has provided the al-Quds Force with an effective operational and logistical platform for conducting subversive activity along the American border and on US territory, as well as in carrying out strategic acts of terrorism. The Mexican drug cartels operate a smuggling apparatus along the 3,000-kilometer-long Mexican-US border. They maintain organizational infrastructures and very loyal manpower from 250 American towns and cities, and their economic means and political influence are almost unlimited.<sup>41</sup> These capabilities allow the cartels to bypass the security features along the border and move vast amounts of drugs, weapons, people, counterfeit goods, explosives, and the like into the United States. It is not inconceivable that, if asked to do so, the cartels would allow the drug smuggling infrastructures to serve Hizbollah agents at carrying out terrorist acts on behalf of al-Quds Force.<sup>42</sup> According to US law enforcement and drug agencies, Hizbollah is already using the cartels' smuggling apparatus to introduce weapons, agents, and money into the United States.<sup>43</sup>

Nevertheless, the al-Quds Force also wants to develop direct working relationships with major players in the Mexican drug market. An attempt to do precisely that was exposed in October 2011 when a plot to assassinate the Saudi Arabian ambassador to Washington came to light. Mansour Arbabsiar, an American citizen of Iranian extraction, was arrested by the FBI. The investigation revealed an attempt by al-Quds operatives to recruit the Mexican drug cartel Los Zetas<sup>44</sup> to carry out strategic terrorist attacks against the United States<sup>45</sup> and the Israeli and Saudi Arabian embassies, and to establish transportation routes to North America for Afghani heroin.<sup>46</sup> According to senior American sources, these attempts were made at the bidding of the highest al-Quds echelons. As a result, Gen. Qasem Soleimani, the commanding officer of al-Quds Force, was placed on the American administration's list of terrorists.<sup>47</sup> James Clapper, the current Director of National Intelligence of the United States, concluded that the affair is evidence of Iran's capacity to carry out an attack on American soil.<sup>48</sup>

It is clear that the Revolutionary Guards and al-Quds Force are deeply involved in the international drug trade, which according to Michael Braun,

the former head of the DEA's operations department, provides them with a vast range of operational and tactical opportunities to advance their strategic goals around the world.<sup>49</sup>

### Implications

The Revolutionary Guards' involvement in the international drug trade should be examined in a broader context and as a part of the changing nature of asymmetrical warfare of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the past, the activity of the weaker side in asymmetrical confrontations was limited to relatively small territories and relied on military tactics and tools aimed primarily against the fighting forces in those territories. Current processes of globalization and technological development, however, give relatively low intensity players the ability to conduct global campaigns and the tools to harm civilian fronts and security interests of nations and powers that are much stronger than they are. The Revolutionary Guards, at the forefront of these developments, systematically and determinedly exploit globalization processes to expand its store of operational capabilities in the asymmetrical conflict against the West and its allies in the Middle East. An example is the Revolutionary Guards' large investment in developing advanced cyberwar capabilities that exploit global information and communications networks to damage the economic and strategic front of powers like the United States.<sup>50</sup> Similar to cyberwar, involvement in the international drug market is also a tool in the asymmetrical battle the Revolutionary Guards are fighting against the West. The organization uses globalization processes, such as the blurring of international borders, the development of global transportation and communications systems, and the growth of international crime syndicates to turn the international drug market into a platform for damaging the strategic interests of the West and its allies.

For Iran's enemies, the connection between a sophisticated and determined global organization like the Revolutionary Guards and the operational capabilities and vast capital represented by the international drug market is rife with security and strategic threats. First, the Revolutionary Guards' involvement in the international drug trade and their deepening relationship with organized crime and drug cartels have improved the organization's operational capabilities, making it more effective at threatening Western interests in many arenas and perpetrating terrorist attacks throughout the world. Second, the Revolutionary Guards'

drug activity could undermine the internal stability of pro-Western regimes in strategic nations, as is happening in Azerbaijan. Third, the financial gain from the drug trade is helping to counter the effectiveness of the international sanctions against the Revolutionary Guards, strengthening its ability to continue to engage in global terrorism.<sup>51</sup>

Still, the Revolutionary Guards' involvement in the international drug trade provides an opportunity to incriminate the organization in illegal activity. While the organization's core activities are subjected to political interpretation and its links to terrorism and cyber attacks leave room for deniability, their involvement in the drug trade is one activity whose traces are harder to hide. This involvement also forces the Revolutionary Guards to forge closer working relationships with criminal organizations that, unlike ideologically motivated terrorists, would not hesitate to sell out their Iranian partners in exchange for lighter sentences and monetary rewards. In addition, the drug trade leaves money tracks that can be followed and used to incriminate the organization. Exposing the links between the Revolutionary Guards and the international drug trade may serve as an effective tool in legal steps and sanctions against Iran and the organization.

All members of the international community are obligated to enforce laws and punish individuals, organizations, and states that take part in the international trade of banned substances and in laundering drug proceeds.<sup>52</sup> Given this, exposing the evidence of the Revolutionary Guards' involvement in the international drug trade would allow the international community to define the organization as one that operate in violation to international law, thereby legally obligating all members of the international community (including Iran itself) to impose sanctions that would limit its activity (apprehension of its members, confiscation of its assets, extradition of wanted individuals, seizures of ships and planes, limits on movement, etc.).<sup>53</sup> This could bypass some of the political and legal obstacles standing in the way of further strengthening the sanctions currently in place against Iran.

Beyond the legal aspect, emphasizing the connections between the Revolutionary Guards and the Iranian regime on the one hand, and the trade in dangerous substances, such as heroin and cocaine on the other, could represent a serious blow to the moral stance to which the Islamic Republic lays claim. Drugs seriously damage the social fabric of many nations throughout the world, including pro-Iranian countries like Russia

and China. Exposing the involvement of the Revolutionary Guards in the international distribution of dangerous drugs to international public opinion could delegitimize the Iranian regime and create public pressure against cooperating with it and supporting it. In addition, Iranian society itself has a very severe problem with heroin addiction, which has destroyed many Iranian families. Stressing the ties between the regime and the drug market could damage the regime's religious and moral authority and even undermine its credibility in the conservative Islamic circles that have traditionally been its powerbase.

In light of all of the above, a concerted effort on the part of the United States, Israel, and other countries to direct intelligence and operational resources into investigating and exposing the ties between the Revolutionary Guards and the international drug trade could result in the creation of legal and political platforms for tightening the sanctions against the organization and furthering the international isolation of the Islamic Republic.

Clearly, the Revolutionary Guards are significantly involved in the international drug trade, both directly and through proxies. This involvement provides the organization with access to sources of financing that bypass international sanctions, as well as to sophisticated operational platforms, that support its subversive efforts aimed at the West. For Iran's enemies, including Israel, the link between a global, sophisticated, and determined organization as the Revolutionary Guards and the world of organized crime is a phenomenon that is, in the absence of appropriate attention and response, liable to have significant strategic ramifications.

## Notes

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